



Manu Mixes Clay and Sunshine

Bulbul Sharma
Shanti Devi



‘Manu Mixes Clay and Sunshine’ by Bulbul Sharma

Illustrations: Shanti Devi

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Manu Mixes Clay and Sunshine

Written by Bulbul Sharma

Illustrated by Shanti Devi



Manu looked out of the doorway from his bed. The sun had already risen. He should have got up earlier but last night they had gone to sleep very late. It had been firing day, and firing day meant hard work for everyone in the family.

Manu's grandfather and his father were potters and Manu was

going to be one too. It was not an easy craft to learn and you needed very skilled fingers to be able to make a perfect pot.

The rainy season, which was a long holiday for potters since they could not do any firing, had just ended and the sky looked clear. This week was going to be very exciting. Today, Manu was going with Dada, his grandfather, to dig clay near the river.



And at the end of the week, Baba, his father, had agreed to take him to the city with him to sell the pots at the market.

Manu already knew the basics of the art of pottery. When he was a baby, he had been given a lump of clay to play with. At first, he just rolled it about, squeezing it in his tiny hands. When he was about three years old, he was asked to make the lump into a ball. Every afternoon, after they came back from school, Manu and his sister Sushma, who was a year older than him, sat under the shade of an old peepal tree and rolled tiny balls of clay. Some were crooked and would not sit properly in their palms but some came out nicely. Manu loved touching the clay in summer because it felt so cool. In winter, he stayed away from the pile of clay and helped Ma make toys. They made fat men, tall women, dogs, deer, owls and toy carts. The other day, his mother had made a beautiful bell with a clay rope four feet long.

Manu heard his mother calling and quickly jumped off the bed, almost bumping his head on a large clay pot full of grain which stood near it. He managed to avoid it just in time. Manu was quite used to bumping into clay pots of all shapes and sizes. Their small hut was filled to the ceiling with earthenware pots, *kulladhs* or clay teacups, flowerpots and clay bowls for setting yogurt. In one corner sat all the wonderful toys his mother had made. During festivals, people came to their house to buy her little Ganesh and Lakshmi statues. Before Diwali, sacks full of small diyas made by Manu and Sushma were piled up in the hut. 'Hey, Manu, give us some,' his friends would ask, so Manu always made a few extra lamps. It felt good to be able to gift your friends something you had made with your own hands.

‘Not everyone can do it. We potters have special hands that work like magic to make so many wonderful things out of just a lump of clay,’ Ma said to him and gave him a few toys for his friends.

In summer, their hut was cool. On rainy days, the raindrops on the tin roof sounded like machine-gun fire. In winter, Baba took the pots out and cleaned them with a fresh coat of geru colours that made them a browny-red. Outside, in the kiln, were many more pots that they did not have space to store. ‘As soon as market day is over I will build a new hut for storing the pots. Manu can help me. He is a big boy now,’ said Baba, smiling at him. Manu felt very proud at being called a big boy! He puffed out his chest and grinned.

Manu went out of the hut and, taking a bucket of water, began to wash his face. He chewed a neem twig to clean his teeth. The bitter juice woke him up properly and he rinsed his mouth quickly. The sweet tea made the bitter taste go away as Manu sipped it from a kulladh that smelled of fresh earth. He tore a hot chapatti and dipped it into the liquid before he ate it.



‘Manu, come on, it is getting late, son. We must leave before the sun gets too hot,’ said Dada. He was wearing a large white turban and carried a spade in his hands. Though he was old, Manu’s grandfather could walk faster than anyone else in their village. People came to him from

far away to learn how to make large clay pots to store grain. Only he could make such huge ones and he helped other potters.

‘Here, pile the sacks on the donkey, Manu,’ he said.

‘Watch out. He may try to kick you like last time,’ said Sushma, laughing loudly.

Manu picked up the sacks and went to the donkey who was chewing grass. They both looked at each other for a minute and then, just when the donkey blinked, Manu quickly threw the sacks on its back. The animal snorted once or twice, shrugged its shoulders and went back to chewing grass.

‘Well done,’ said Sushma and clapped her hands.

Manu and his grandfather set out at once. The sky was a beautiful pink and orange colour and a cool breeze touched their faces. They left the village boundary and began walking towards the river. Many farmers, who were already in their fields watering their crops, called out to them, ‘Off to the river to catch fish, Govindlal?’ Dada laughed but did not stop to chat with them. Everyone was very busy these days, working all day long and only stopping briefly to have lunch under the shade of a tree.

Soon they reached the river bank and Manu ran towards the banyan tree. He looked up, his eyes bright and eager. Yes, it was there. Two round yellow eyes looked down at Manu and a brown head nodded. The spotted owl was saying ‘Welcome to my river, Manu’.

The little boy smiled and went down to the river. Dada had already found a place to dig. They began to dig up the clay. It was not very

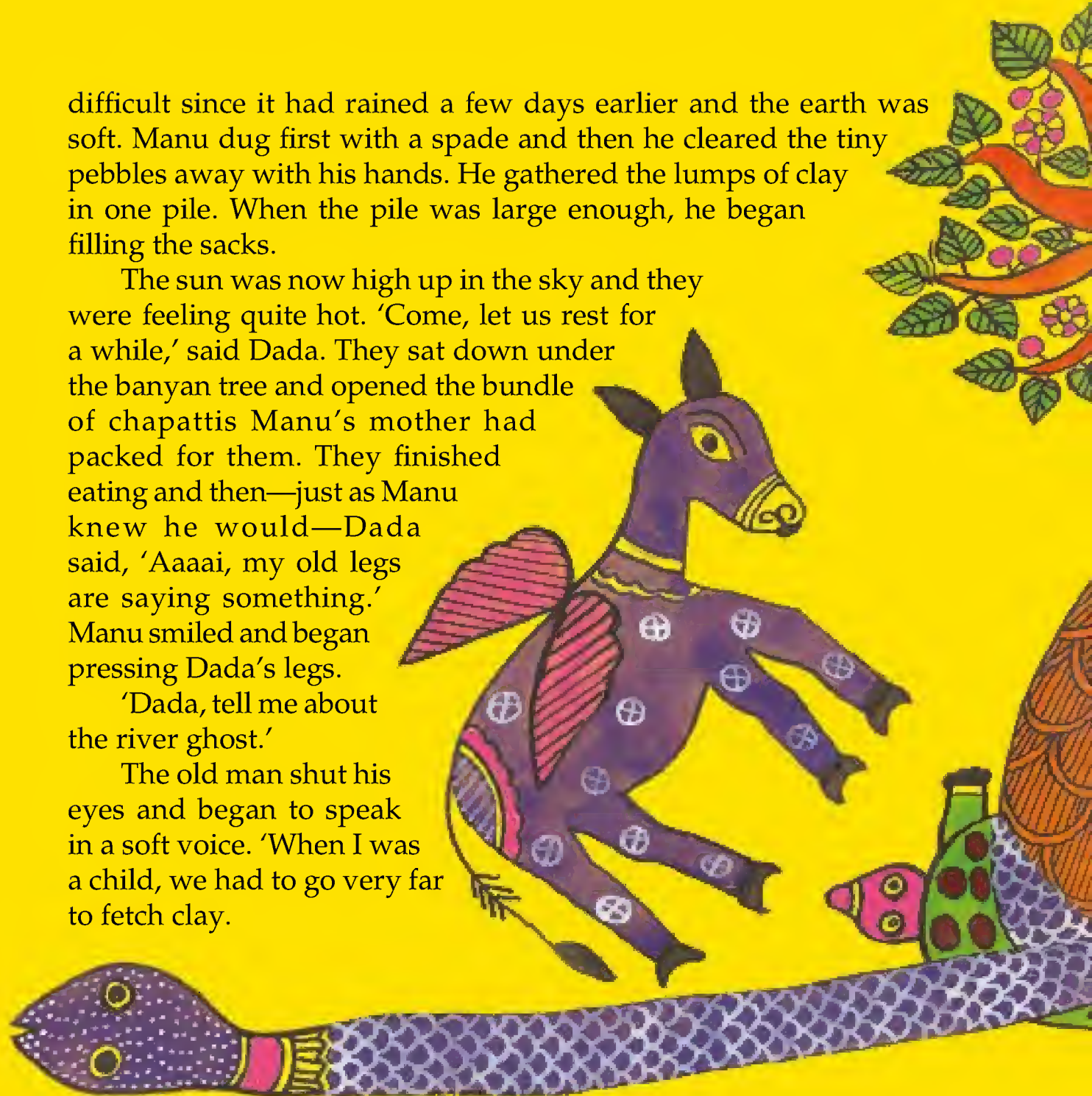


difficult since it had rained a few days earlier and the earth was soft. Manu dug first with a spade and then he cleared the tiny pebbles away with his hands. He gathered the lumps of clay in one pile. When the pile was large enough, he began filling the sacks.

The sun was now high up in the sky and they were feeling quite hot. 'Come, let us rest for a while,' said Dada. They sat down under the banyan tree and opened the bundle of chapattis Manu's mother had packed for them. They finished eating and then—just as Manu knew he would—Dada said, 'Aaaai, my old legs are saying something.' Manu smiled and began pressing Dada's legs.

'Dada, tell me about the river ghost.'

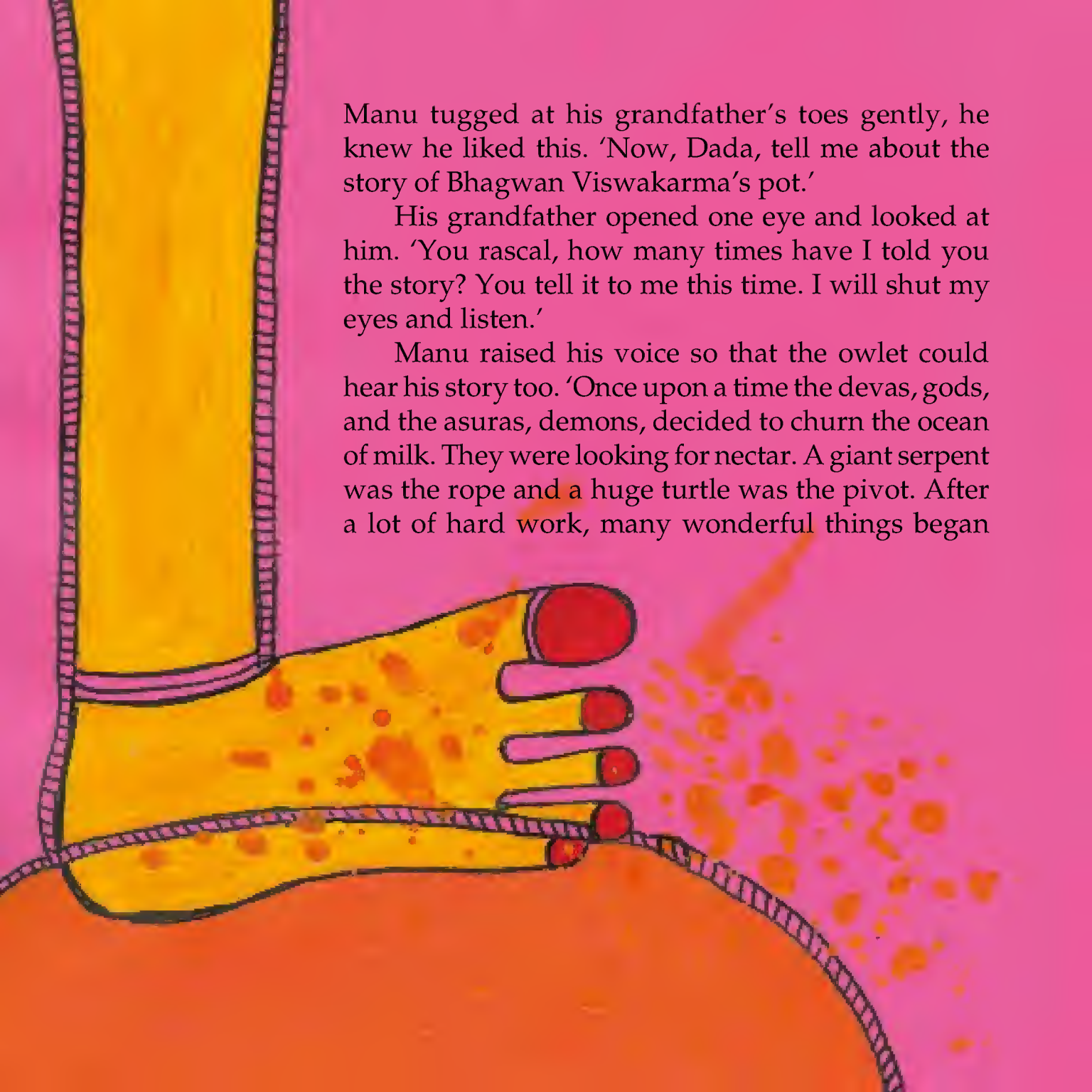
The old man shut his eyes and began to speak in a soft voice. 'When I was a child, we had to go very far to fetch clay.





In those days, our village did not have proper roads. One day, our donkey sat down and refused to get up. It was getting dark and we did not know what to do.

‘Suddenly a man came up to us. He was carrying a large black clay pot. “I can make your donkey walk but you will have to take me back to the village,” he said, holding the pot on his head. We agreed. Then he said a few words in the donkey’s ears, tapped the clay pot and the donkey got up at once. The man climbed on the donkey’s back, still holding the pot on his head, and we set off. Just when we were about to reach the village, he jumped off and ran into the darkness, tapping the clay pot. The people in the village said he was Bhagwan Viswakarma’s potter who had come to help us.’



Manu tugged at his grandfather's toes gently, he knew he liked this. 'Now, Dada, tell me about the story of Bhagwan Viswakarma's pot.'

His grandfather opened one eye and looked at him. 'You rascal, how many times have I told you the story? You tell it to me this time. I will shut my eyes and listen.'

Manu raised his voice so that the owlet could hear his story too. 'Once upon a time the devas, gods, and the asuras, demons, decided to churn the ocean of milk. They were looking for nectar. A giant serpent was the rope and a huge turtle was the pivot. After a lot of hard work, many wonderful things began

to appear from the ocean: a magical tree, a wish-fulfilling cow, a flying horse and finally the nectar. But where was the pot to hold this nectar? Bhagwan Viswakarma quickly came forward and crafted a pot out of clay. From then on, humans learned to make pots.'

Manu thought for a while and said, 'Our potter's wheel is one of the first machines made by man that uses the power of motion.'

Dada lifted his head and looked at him with surprise. 'Who told you that?'

Manu laughed and tickled his grandfather's feet. 'My teacher in school told us. She also said that the potter's craft is one of the oldest crafts in the world. They have found many clay toys and pots buried under the ground in the places where people lived thousands of years ago.' Manu tried to recall the many other things his teacher had told him about potters—how they made the first brick, and how they dug the earth to make a pit. But Dada was getting ready to leave.

After loading the sacks on the donkey, they set off. Manu looked at the owlet and



it winked at him twice as if to say, 'Come back soon, there is plenty of clay left on the river bank.'

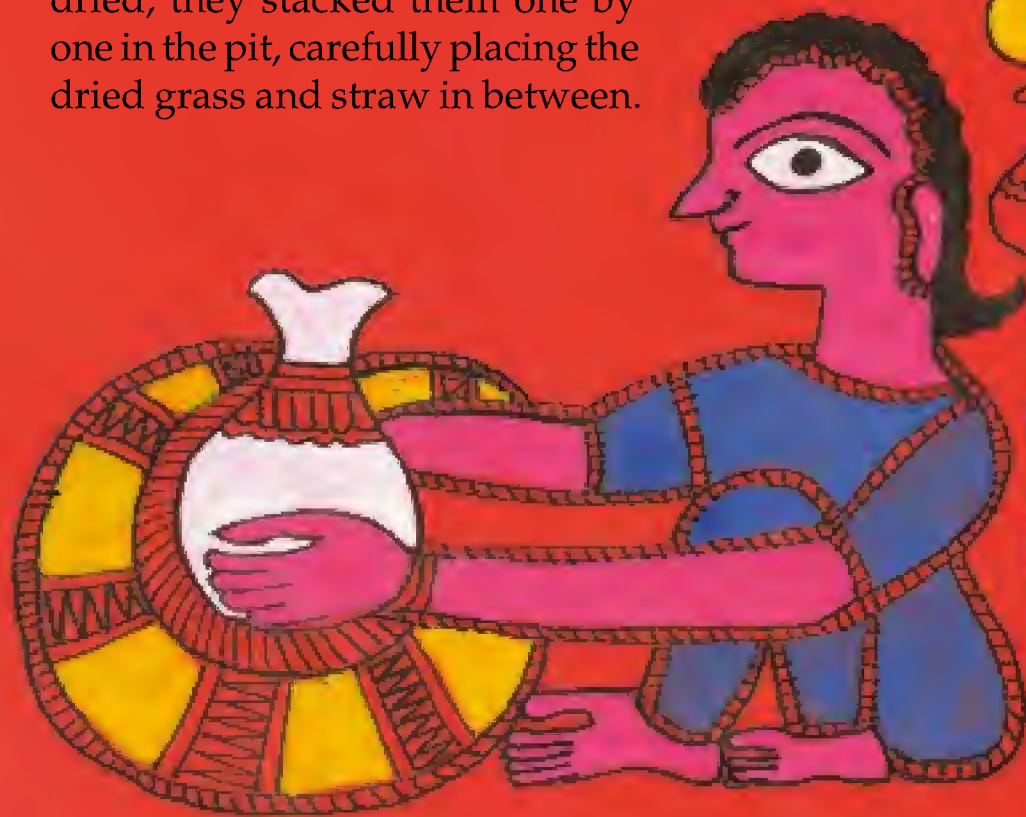
The following day, after he got back from school, Manu helped Baba break the now dried clay into small pieces. Later, they would use a big sieve to separate the stones, and then his parents would knead the clay with water. Sometimes Manu and Sushma helped by jumping up and down on the wet clay. Manu liked to stomp on this bed of clay because it made a funny, squidgy sound when his feet sank into it. Once the clay was well-kneaded and his father had prodded it with his fingers a few times to check if it was ready, they moulded it into a few huge lumps and stored it under a damp sack.

Every day, Baba and Dada would take a little bit of the lump out and shape it into balls. These would be thrown on the wheel to make pots. In a few quick turns, a beautiful pot would rise on the wheel as if by magic. One second there was just a lump of clay, and then a pot stood in its place!

Manu was learning to use the wheel. But so far the pots he had made were not as balanced as the ones his father or grandfather made. His fell down or had long necks that drooped or fat sides that bulged out. Sushma laughed at these funny shapes because she could just twist a bit of clay into a long snake and quickly coil it into a perfect pot. But Manu knew how to shape toy animals and Sushma kept asking him to give her one. He had made a big owl which was in the kiln getting baked. He would give it to Sushma on Diwali but it was a secret now. Sushma had made a toy car for her brother and it too was in the kiln sitting next to the owl. Only Baba, who had loaded the kiln, knew about these little gifts.

The kiln was still hot. It would take at least three days for it to cool and then they would break it open. Manu loved the smell of freshly baked pots. It was as good as the fragrance that floated up when the first raindrops fell on the ground.

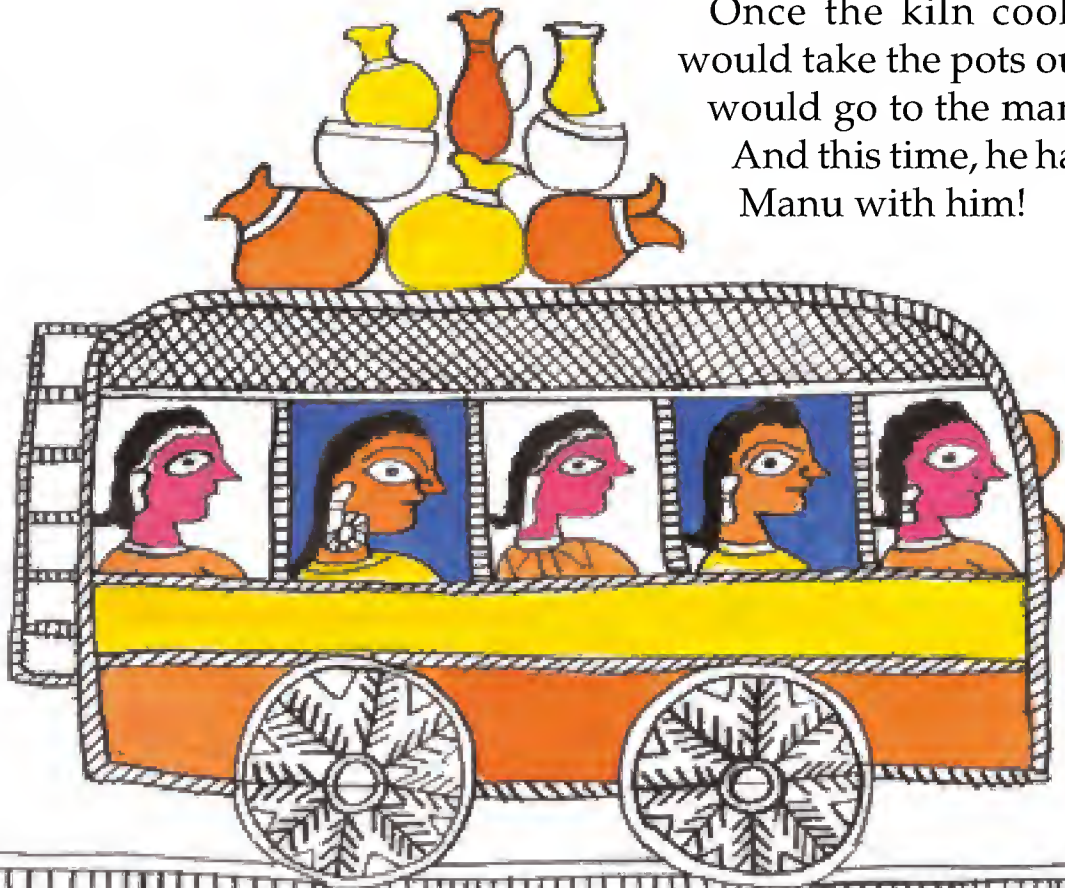
Building the kiln took a long time, and only his father and Dada knew how to do it really well. First, they dug a shallow pit in the ground. They could not fire the pots till the sun had dried them properly and even a little bit of water would make the kiln burst. After checking that all the pots had dried, they stacked them one by one in the pit, carefully placing the dried grass and straw in between.



Then they broke some cowdung cakes and covered the pots with them. Finally, the entire pile was covered with wet earth and Baba would ask Manu and Sushma to pat it. 'You have small hands, you can do it best.'

Manu and Sushma would pat the earth very gently and carefully. Sushma would run around the kiln singing, 'Fire our pots, fire our pots well, then fill them with *laddoos*, puffed rice and jaggery.' As soon as the song finished, Ma would bring a metal plate of jaggery from the hut. It was believed to be lucky to have something sweet when the kiln was fired.

Once the kiln cooled down, they would take the pots out and then Baba would go to the market to sell them. And this time, he had agreed to take Manu with him!



The week passed slowly. Manu could not keep his mind on his studies. All day long he thought about the trip to the big city. His teacher had agreed to let him miss school for a day, on condition that he wrote a description of his trip to share with the class.

Finally, the day arrived. Manu and his father loaded the new pots and toys on two donkeys to take them to the bus stop. Everyone in the village knew where they were going as both Manu and Baba were dressed in their best clothes. Baba had tied on a new turban, and Manu was wearing black trousers and a white shirt, just like a city boy.

Manu's uncle, who lived in a nearby village, was also going to the market. He made water troughs for animals. 'Now they use them in the city gardens to plant flowers,' he said, twirling his white moustache and laughing.

The bus arrived. It was crowded but they managed to load the pots and baskets of toys on its roof. The bus gave a loud bang, groaned and coughed, and then lurched forward. They were on their way to the big city.

Manu watched the fields go by, waving to children playing in villages just like his. When he and Sushma waved to the passengers in a train or bus, he felt very happy when they waved back.

The bus reached the outskirts of the city after five long hours. They waited till everyone had got out and then climbed on the roof to get their pots down. Luckily, nothing was broken. Now they had to find two rickshaws to take them to the market. 'You wait here near the pots. I will settle the price with them,' said his father. Finally, after much haggling, the rickshaw drivers agreed.



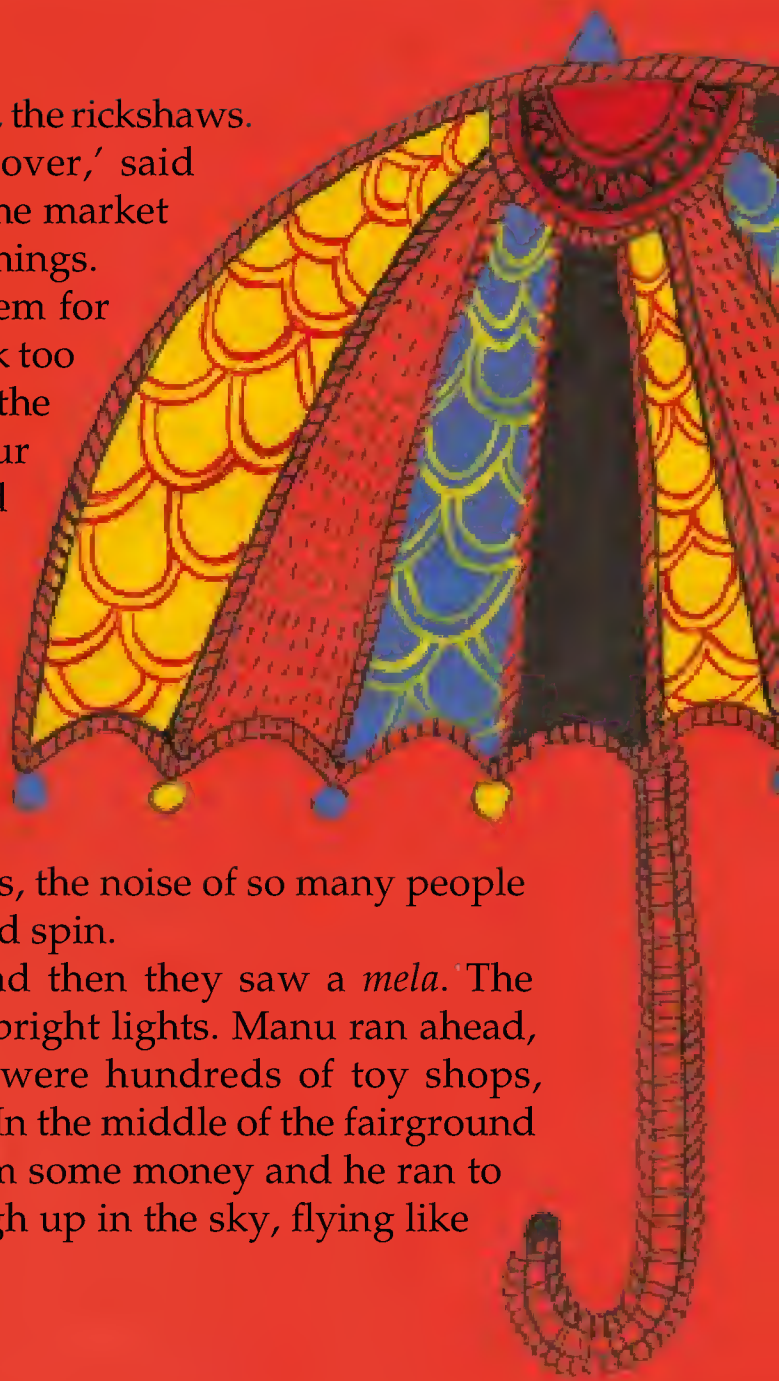


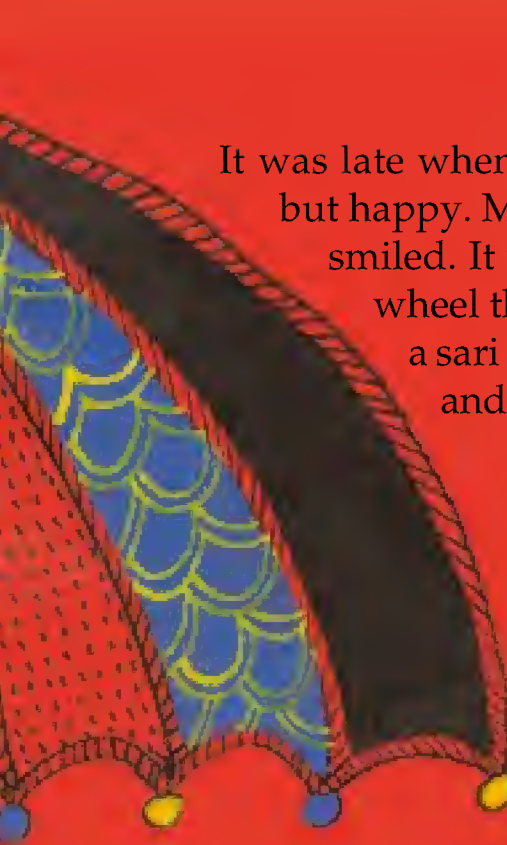
‘All this costs so much—the bus fare, the rickshaws. We hardly have any money left over,’ said Baba. They went to a big shop in the market which sold all kinds of terracotta things.

When the shopkeeper paid them for the pots and toys, Baba did not look too sad. ‘This time the sale is good. All the pots have been sold. Those toys your mother and you made have fetched good money. They want many more,’ he said. ‘Come, Manu, let us eat something.’

They found a shop that sold hot milk and *jalebis*. Manu ate quickly because he was very hungry but he also looked around him all the time. The cars, the lights, the noise of so many people rushing about—it all made his head spin.

They walked around a bit and then they saw a *mela*. The entrance to the fair glittered with bright lights. Manu ran ahead, pulling his father’s hand. There were hundreds of toy shops, unusual games, and stalls of food. In the middle of the fairground stood a giant wheel. Baba gave him some money and he ran to the ticket counter. Soon he was high up in the sky, flying like a bird.





It was late when they went back to the bus stop. They were tired but happy. Manu's father counted the money he had made and smiled. It was not much but he would be able to buy a new wheel that was better than their old one. They had bought a sari for Ma, a new jacket for Dada and clothes for Manu and Sushma.

'What about you, Baba?' Manu asked.

'I really don't need anything,' his father replied as they sat down in their seats in the bus. The bus would leave only after an hour.

But Manu had decided that he was going to buy Baba something. He counted the money he had left. He had only bought the giant wheel ticket and some candyfloss. He still had seven rupees in his pocket. His father had fallen asleep in his seat and did not stir as Manu got off the bus.

Manu ran up to a small shop near the bus stop and asked the old man who was dozing in a chair, 'What can you give for my father for seven rupees?'

The man smiled and asked, 'What does your father like?'

'I don't know. We are potters. We have come from the village to sell our pots and toys.'

The old man thought for a while and said, 'Hmm. Let me see. Potters work very hard. But they have magic in their hands. What can we city people give them? They can create anything they want—cups, bowls,

toys and even tables. Umm... maybe an umbrella. You cannot make an umbrella out of clay. But you have only seven rupees and an umbrella costs sixty. What shall we do?' He peered at Manu.

'I have no money but I can do some work. Our bus won't leave for another hour,' said Manu, looking at the umbrella. How nice and big it was. It would keep the sun and rain out.

'All right,' said the old man. 'Help me put these sacks on that top shelf.'

Manu jumped up. The sacks were not heavy at all. Carrying clay from the river bank and kneading clay had given him strong arm muscles. In half an hour, he had put all the sacks up on the shelf. Then he helped the shopkeeper gather some paper bags and stacked them in neat piles. 'You are a strong fellow though you are so small. Here, take your umbrella! Don't tell anyone I gave it to you or else they will all ask for one. And here are some biscuits for you to eat on the bus.'

Manu ran back to the bus and hid the umbrella under the seat. The noise woke Baba.

'What—what is that? Someone must have forgotten the umbrella. I must give it to the driver,' he said, getting up from his seat and heading to the door of the bus before Manu could say anything.

'No, it is yours!' It was the old shopkeeper who had come to see how Manu's father liked his new umbrella. 'Your son, who is a very good, strong boy, earned it for you. Next time you want to sell your pots or toys you can bring them to me.'

Everyone in the bus heard what Manu had done and looked at the

boy. 'Lucky man to have such a good son,' they told Baba, who kept smiling and patting Manu's head.

It was dawn when they reached home. Manu was happy to see his village though he had been away only for a day. He ran to Ma and began telling her all that he had seen. Sushma woke up, and Dada came out. They lit a fire and made tea in a big clay pot which they had made with their own hands. As they sat together, slowly the sky turned pink and orange and another day of making pots out of clay, sunshine and fire began.



About the illustrations

Madhubani (forest of honey) painting is named after the district of Madhuban, where along with the neighbouring district of Darbhanga, in the Mithila region of Bihar, it is practised. Traditionally, women painted in this style to make floor decorations (*aripana*) on festive occasions, on paper used to wrap the vermilion (*sindur*) sent by a bridegroom to his bride, and the walls of the bride's wedding chamber. Different communities have distinctive styles, but all have motifs drawn from a storyworld of deities, sacred trees, primordial creatures, ritual accessories, epic heroes and heroines, women and men, and symbols of prosperity and fertility and agricultural life.

Dastkari Haat Samiti is a large organization of Indian craftspeople, working to improve the social and economic status of people engaged in traditional handicraft skills. Local forms of painting and craftwork have been used to illustrate this series of four stories to encourage the sharing of varied cultural expressions. This work was made possible with the support of UNESCO, New Delhi.





Pratham Books was set up in 2004, as part of the Read India movement, a nation-wide campaign to promote reading among children. Pratham Books is a not-for-profit organization that publishes quality books for children in multiple Indian languages. Our mission is to see "a book in every child's hand" and democratize the joy of reading. If you would like to contribute to our mission, please email us at info@prathambooks.org.



Bulbul Sharma is an author and painter who lives in Delhi. She has published five collections of short stories, a novel and three books for children. At present she is working on a collection of short stories for neo-literate children. Her stories have been translated into French, Italian, German and Finnish. She has held several exhibitions of her paintings in India and abroad, and her paintings are in the collection of the National Gallery of Modern Art, Lalit Kala Akademi and the Chandigarh Museum as well as in corporate and private collections. Bulbul conducts regular art and storytelling workshops for children with special needs.



Shanti Devi practises the traditional Mithila art. She has participated in exhibitions in Canada, Australia and India, and conducts training programmes in art for school children.

Manu's father and grandfather are potters, and Manu is learning the craft. This lively story depicts both the simple joys and the hardships of a potter's life, from gathering clay and making pots to selling them in the city markets. Bulbul Sharma's enchanting story is illustrated by Shanti Devi in the Madhubani style.

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